



September 9 – September 24, 2004

September 9th – Thursday

Bullseye! Dead-center! In the Heart!

There are a ton of things to prepare for when embarking on a mission trip. I've tried to think of everything. Because something inside of me thinks that if I think of everything and do everything I need to do, then I am prepared. Well, I think I've thought of everything and I think I've done everything I need to do. So why don't I feel prepared?

A passage from the Bible has been swirling in my mind and trying to find its target in my heart. It is a word from 1 Peter 3:15:

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

Now I get it, or should I say, now it gets me. Bullseye! Dead-center! In the heart. True preparation begins with the heart, not the head. I've been thinking about all the things I needed to do rather than acknowledging that this trip first and foremost, belongs to Jesus. How could I forget that this trip was His idea? He has made preparations I can't even imagine. My "to do list" is a joke compared to everything He has already put in place for this trip. Sometimes I think I'm just about as dumb as a fence post.

First I need to set my heart on Who is really in-charge of this trip. It's Jesus. And I'm not prepared until I've fully submitted to Him being the Master and Commander of this mission adventure.

Bullseye!

What about all that “to do” stuff I’ve been fussing about the past couple of months? Well, bottom line, it doesn’t matter what I’ve packed in my bags if I haven’t brought my hope. Bullseye, again! Dead-center!

I have about 8 hours on the plane before I arrive in Manaus. I’m going to make my final and most important preparations for this trip. I’m going to ponder The Hope that is the heart of my life. That Hope is Jesus. I’m going to resolve to not let things on this trip get so complicated that I miss talking about the simple message of Jesus, His love for me, His payment on the Cross for all my sins, and the privilege He has given me to play a role in His Great Plan to win the world.

I knew it, but until this moment, it just hadn’t pierced my heart. Jesus has already taken care of the itinerary and agenda. My part is to be prepared to tell about The Hope I have.

Bullseye! Dead-center! In the heart!

September 10th – Friday

Dear God, Not Another Difficult Church



My good friend, Pastor Guadisee, has a new church. I visited it last night. It’s a small church on a narrow, dead end, ally road. My first feeling when I saw it was such a disappointment. For many years, Pastor Guadisee and his wife, Hymunda, struggled in a small church in a remote river village in the Amazon interior. They made many sacrifices to minister in that church and suffered a lot of discouragements. I couldn’t help but wonder why God hadn’t given him a little better church after all he has been through.

I remembered visiting Guadisee 3 years ago when his ministry was going so badly that his church had all but died. Guadisee had lost heart. He had given up. He was so discouraged that he saw no point in even opening the church doors. Instead, he was spending all of his time tending a large garden behind the church. At least the garden put some food on the table for the family.

Those were dark days for Guadisee and Hy. Their family was barely surviving. I felt a deep burden for Guadisee. I know there is a great pastor inside of him. But at this moment, the pastor had been whipped and broken. So, I encouraged him. I gave him an offering from our church to relieve the oppression of poverty his family was experiencing. And the offering was enough to jump-start his ministry. It helped.

Through the grace of God and with encouragement, Guadisee's heart and ministry revived. When people saw the life and hope in their pastor return, they returned to the church. It is an amazing come-back story. Within a couple of weeks, Guadisee's church was full again and his ministry prospered.

Now Guadisee has returned to the big city to pastor another church - another difficult church. I couldn't help but think, "What in the world is God up to? Couldn't He have done a little better for Guadisee? I tried not to show it, but I was really disappointed.

As we visited and renewed our friendship, Guadisee said, "I remember what you said to me when I was so discouraged. You asked me why my garden looked better than my church? You told me I was a Pastor, not a gardener. You said I belonged in the church growing God's people, not vegetables." He smiled and laughed. Maybe he had picked up on the disappointment I was feeling in my heart for him? I'm not sure. But I was sure when I saw his smile and a look of strength in his eyes that his heart was fine. God uses brokenness to make us stronger. And I could tell that now, Guadisee was strong. He was pastoring another hard out of the way place, right where God needed him the most.

What in the world was God up to with my good friend Guadisee? More great work using one of His best servants to do one of the most difficult tasks: Pastoring a small church on a narrow, dead end, ally road. Go Guadisee.

September 11th – Saturday

The Enemy Commeth

It is hard to write "September 11th" in my journal without reliving the emotion of America's attack on 9/11. People here don't get it. Why should they? Until they are attacked, it's just another shocking news story of something that happened in a far away place. But I get it. We are at war.

The enemy is anywhere, lives in shadows, plotting and planning on how to attack to cause the greatest amount of destruction. Terrorists have changed us and our way of life.

Jesus says that Satan is a Thief who has come to rob, kill and destroy. I've read this passage from John 10:10 many times, but it never really sunk in how serious this spiritual terrorist is. He too hides himself. He studies us and knows our vulnerabilities. He chooses just the right moment to attack us. And tonight he attacked.

Pastor John had a great baptism service prepared. He brought in a portable swimming pool and had the church wonderfully decorated for the new converts who would be making their vow of faith and be baptized. But about an hour before the service was to start, the sky turned purple and black and we had a gigantic monsoon downpour. The timing couldn't have been worse.

God is the one who is responsible for the weather, not Satan. The rain is a blessing, even though it may interfere with our plans occasionally. But I was concerned that the monsoon would make us call off the service.

These people live around this kind of weather. Most of them have to walk to where they want to go. And they all just waited it out and came to the church after the rain let up. No big deal. About 800 finally wandered in while they were having a great praise and worship hour. Then I preached a message using John 10:10 and it hit me that we had been hit by him – The Thief. About 20 people didn't show up for the baptism. It didn't seem like such a big deal because more than 100 people did.



But we lost 20.

What happened? John, in his causal way, said, "I guess, my brother, about 20 people didn't show up." We both wondered why? But I felt we had been attacked. I felt the same feeling I felt after seeing the Twin Towers in New York come down and it sunk in that it was the deliberate work of terrorists. He hit us and took out 20 of our people who were committed to be baptized.

It was a simple operation for him. All he had to do was convince them not to come. Any excuse Satan can get us to buy will work. Maybe tonight it was the rain, or the service would run too late, or they could get baptized next time, or there will be so many that they wouldn't be missed. The list is endless. He accomplished his mission to rob, destroy and kill our 20. He robbed them of the joy of joining the family of God. He destroyed the importance and urgency of them making their commitment of faith. He killed the new person God wanted to create in them tonight. The Thief did his work.

I challenged Pastor John's church to go to all 20 and assure them we missed them, that they were important, and we needed them to join our eternal family of Christ through Baptism. Satan had made them victims. We would now reclaim and cherish them. We were going to take back what the Thief stole from us. We were going to give them a new moment to confess Christ. And we were going to set a new date soon for them to be reborn of water and the Spirit. They wouldn't stay victims long. It was our responsibility to see to that.

Everyone clapped and cheered at the challenge. They accepted it. The Thief had come, but we were going to get back what he stole. It seems to me that this is the church at it's finest.

September 12th – Sunday

When Bigger is not Better

I always thought that bigger was better, but now I'm not so sure. I always asked God to bless me with a great big mega-church. Thank God He doesn't give us what we ask for when we make stupid requests. I take it back God, all those prayers about wanting a mega-church. Now I know that You were right and I was wrong.

I remember my first visits to Pastor John's church. He had about 200 in worship. And they were so friendly and outgoing. It was amazing to experience their community and connections with each other. But I noticed a lot of that community began to fade when his worship went above 500. And now, worshipping 800 people, it really stands out. The warmth and connection of community just isn't there like it used to be.

I really miss it.

We had a great service tonight. It's wonderful experiencing 800 inspired and excited people in worship. But afterwards, the community and connecting just wasn't there. Too many people just don't know one another.

After the service, Pastor John took me to one of his satellite churches meeting in a small storefront. Pastor John wanted me to see this new growing congregation and give me a chance to encourage them. Wow, I was the one encouraged from the moment I walked in. There were about 100 people there and you could feel their interconnection from the first moment. It was great, just like I remembered it back when Pastor John's church was under 500.

What does this mean? I guess I'm learning that bigger isn't necessarily better. Size isn't the measure of a great church. It is the depth of community and connection that is the better measure.

Several times since I've been here, Pastor John has taken a deep breath and let it slip that he often thinks about starting a new church from scratch in a different city. I know what makes him feel that way. He misses the connections and community too. We have both come to the realization that smaller is better.

September 13h – Monday

My New Congregation

I'm back in Uricurituba. 6 years ago, this was the first river village I visited. It was dark when our boat pulled in. I disembarked to find the doctors rushing up the mud trail to the only streetlight in town where a man who ended up on the losing end of a machete was being held down on a table, wrist slashed and bleeding to death. As the doctors grabbed their medical bags to work on the guy, someone yelled at me to help hold the guy down. I guess I forgot to mention he was drunk in addition to bleeding. It was some welcome to Uricurituba.

After the guy was sedated and stitched up, I tried the best I could to wipe the blood off my hands and shirt. We all went down a very dark path. This was the first service I'd been to in Brazil. I preached. It was my baptism into mission work in the Amazon.

The church is a little larger than a tractor shed. It had one 60 watt bulb hanging down from a wire in the center of the room. To say this is a humble church in not much of a town is pretty accurate.

I've been to Uricurituba one other time to help install a new pastor, Pastor Valench. He's about 70 years old and blind. Now blindness would hinder most people, but not Pastor Valench. He's always taking trips to other river villages. They say he's been up rivers that haven't even been named and visits remote people in the jungle that are considered unknown natives. How does he do it? He steers and his wife tells him which way to go. He's an amazing guy. And on my second trip to Uricurituba, I preached again.



This is my third trip to Uricurituba. Guess who's preaching? Yes, it's me again.

I was thinking about what to preach about and asked Pastor John. He said, "I don't know how many people will come tonight, but you should preach to the Pastors. They are your congregation." God really spoke to my heart in those words. He was setting the agenda of this river trip. My preaching was to be directed to the Pastors in our group. They were the real audience of my trip.

It made sense. I felt the Lord showing me He was up to something between me, the messages I'd brought, and these church leaders. They are a new congregation. And my first sermon to them will be under the 60 watt bulb in the church at Uricurituba.

September 14h – Tuesday

The Dangerous River

The Maderia River is a dangerous river, especially at this time of the year.

I might have neglected to share that detail with my family and friends? I guess I forgot. But the Pastor's I'm with who have traveled these rivers their whole lives haven't forgotten. They are very concerned.

The fact is, the Maderia is the most dangerous in the whole Amazon. And everyone on the boat is taking our river travel very seriously.

Before we push off from the riverbanks, Pastor Asaphe calls all the Pastors together on the top level of the boat and we pray...

It's not one of those less than a minute, "Thank you Jesus and give us a safe trip," kind of prayer. But this was a 20 minuter with a lot of loud cries and some serious calling on Jesus kinds of prayer. And we are praying every day, morning and night, and at every stop along this trip. Last night, Asaphe stayed up into the early morning hours because he was concerned about us traveling at night.

The reason for so much concern is that this is the hottest and driest season in the Amazon. All the rivers are at their lowest. That means rocks, sand bars and debris are real hazards. The boats we travel on have round bottoms and run shallow in the water. They are top heavy and can be tipsy in a strong wind.

Oops! Did I also forget to mention that this is the season for wind and lightening storms? Yes, we've had one of those storms almost every day. One minute the sky is clear, and the next thing you know, the sky turns purple and then the bottom falls out on you. There is a report of a boat sinking almost every day. Yesterday a tripple decker boat capsized and a number of people drown. Well, I guess I can really pick when to come to the Amazon.

Another reason they say this river so dangerous is that it is a young river. I can't quite figure this out because it wasn't like it just showed up a few years ago? When I asked them what "young" meant, they said the river is young because it keeps changing its path and hasn't made up its mind where it is going to run. That keeps the river full of surprises.

I try to pay attention before I get to sleep at night, to make sure I know how to get out if something happens. I have a small light I strap to my wrist. To be honest, I doubt that either precaution would help very much if we turned over. Prayer is really the only thing we can do. We've done that tonight. Now it's time to get some rest.

September 15h – Wednesday

Just a Few Things

There are just a few things that are hard to get used to in the Amazon. The first is 110 degrees in the shade. About noon the morning breeze completely stops. The intensity of the sun on the equator just burns your skin. You feel like you are in a frying pan, especially white skinned folks like me. For about 3 hours there is no relief, even in the shade. It's literally hard to breath. I know it's not really 110 degrees today, because if it were, I'd be dead.

I don't mind adapting to different foods. Rice and beans every day; noon, supper and bedtime snack, gets old fast. The fish here is delicious. I'm sure back in the States, I couldn't afford to buy the fish I'm eating every day. But you do eat it everyday, fixed everyway. I'm still not used to the fish soup. The guys know it and they joke with me at every meal saying we are having bordure. That's their version of catfish soup. Of course, they have to put the whole fish in to make it soup.

Breakfast is tapioca cakes, egg sandwiches, purple baked potatoes, and fried bananas. The coffee is a little bit of coffee in a cup of milk with enough sugar to almost make the drink a syrup. The fruits and juices are out of this world.

If you haven't got the picture yet, this is a high carb culture. I asked if they had heard of Adkins? They haven't. Adkins doesn't have a chance in the Amazon.

I try to fit in and take 4 showers a day. They cool you off more than anything else.

The nights are long and restless. It's really hot and hard to go to sleep sweating in a hammock. I think a lot of my family and friends. Nighttimes are homesick times.

And then there are the karapenna. That's what they call mosquitoes. They are vicious down here. Just try to say karapena: ka-rap'-enna. It sounds like a curse word, doesn't it? It is because they are. And by he way, they drink insect repellent like it was Sunny-D.

But the starry night sky from a riverboat in the deep dark jungle is the most amazing sight I've ever seen. I could stand at the rail of the boat and watch the blue dolphins race along side all day long. The look of a young child who has never seen an Anglo before is priceless. "My brother," is the way Pastor John starts a sentence when talking to me. A total stranger who can't begin to pronounce your name gives you a hug when they hear the word "Pastor".

And the name of Jesus means friend anywhere you go.

September 16th – Thursday

The Richest Place in the World

Visiting a developing country like Brazil dramatically reveals the huge difference between our standard of living in America with the rest of the world. We are so rich and blessed.

As Pastor John and I were walking through the river village of Borba, we passed by the large city cemetery. He asked me, "Brother Chad, Do you know what the wealthiest place in the world is?" I said, "I guess America or maybe Saudi Arabia?" He said, "No my brother, it is the graveyard, because buried there are the hopes and dreams of generations whose lives have come and gone and are now buried in the graveyard."

It's an interesting point of view, don't you think? Life is real wealth. To be able to get up in the morning and live the day, that's what's valuable. And think about all the treasures we have; our ideas, our hopes, and our dreams. Who could even begin to put a price tag on years of living and loving a spouse or the joy of watching a grandchild grow? But at the end of a lifetime, it is earth to earth, ashes to ashes. All the wanting, chasing, having and keeping are buried in the graveyard. It is the wealthiest place on earth.

This has particularly struck me today as I think about the ministry of Pastor Iouta here in Borba. Of all the pastors I've met in the Amazon, he is the one with the greatest vision for ministry. He is not only a successful businessman, but a charismatic Pastor. He is in the middle of constructing the most modern church I've seen in the river villages. He is developing a large retreat center with concert stage, soccer field, volleyball pit, bathrooms, shower facilities, industrial kitchen; the works. He has built up the largest church in the city of Borba. And now his ministry is coming to an end. After years of carving his dreams out of the jungle, right when you could see the vision becoming a reality, it ends.

It's a familiar story. A few members of the church become critical of the Pastor. The pastor becomes defensive. People talk and talk and talk. And after a while of stress, conflict and antagonism, the Pastor loses heart for his ministry. He reaches a point where the dream isn't worth the price he has to pay. He wants to leave and start over somewhere else.

My heart just ached for Pastor Iouta. I know that a man with his vision, creativity, and ability is very rare. He is a man that can follow through with his ideas. In a couple more years, the church construction would be finished and it would be a magnificent place to lead people to the Lord. In a couple more years, the retreat center would be finished, and there would be nothing like it anywhere in the interior of the Amazon. But none of these great dreams will be finished. I'm sure another Pastor will follow Pastor Iouta and finish things best he can, but not the way Iouta would have. What could have been will be buried along with so many other unfinished dreams and visions that never get completed in the church.

It hurts me because I know how wonderful these things could have been for the ministry in the Amazon. Why couldn't God have let it work out? Why did he let another "church controversy" bury another ministry of vision?

Jesus said, *"I have come to bring life and bring it to the full"* (John 10:10).

Ironically, this is one of the main scripture passages I'm teaching on this trip. It's no coincidence. The life Jesus comes to bring is never really about buildings and retreat centers. It's about our connections, our love, our witness, our service to care for one another, and our sacrifices to reach those who don't know Jesus. These are the things of life that fulfill the purpose God has for our lives. They are all the treasures that don't get buried in the graveyard, but go with us into eternity. I'm not quite sure how it will work, but God does. I guess heaven can do without what Iouta would have built.

Well, the graveyard in Borba just got a lot richer today as Pastor Iouta's ministry ends. But the real wealth of his ministry in Borba will be seen in heaven, as will all of ours. The Lord has grander visions and bigger plans for Iouta. I guess we have to have enough wisdom to let what needs to be buried, be buried.

September 17th – Friday

I Wish You Could Have Been There

This morning we arrived in Manicore after traveling all day and all night. The church here has a new pastor, Pastor Louis. He, his wife and two children have been here less than a year. I could tell he is still trying to make the transition from the big city of Manaus to the interior. It's a tough transition to make.

Pastor Louis is soft spoken and gentle. I like him. Tonight we had a service at his church and 4 Pastors of other churches in town showed up. That really impressed me. He has already built bridges to the Baptist, Presbyterian and Assemblies of God Churches. I understand he meets with these Pastors every week for fellowship and to cooperate in ministry. Only 20% of this large town is Christian. They need to work together.

I gave Pastor Louis and the other attending Pastors a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*. They were surprised at the gift. After my sermon, the Pastor of The Assemblies of God Church said that they are going to have a Pastor's Conference of all the

Assemblies Churches on the Maderia River around Easter of 2005. He wants me to come and be their speaker. I was pretty shocked at the invitation.

You can't believe the sacrifices the Pastors and their families make to come to an interior church. Pastor Louis has dramatically lowered their standard of living to come to Manicore. They have gone from middle class big city to lower class interior. It's like having your income cut 75%. And when you get to the interior, everything is so primitive and limited. It's a tough transition. And everyone in the family willingly makes sacrifices.

I felt like this was a great place to give an offering from Spirit of Life. I wish you could have been there. This is one of the greatest privileges I get as Pastor. I wish every member of my church could have seen the expression of appreciation and how overwhelmed this gentle man became as I gave him our gift. He cried.

I knew this offering I was giving Pastor Louis is a seed we've now planted in his ministry. That's what it felt like. Now we let the Lord grow it.

I wish you could have been there. I believe it was better for my heart than it was for Pastor Louis.

September 18h – Saturday

The Church That Hebamah Built

It's amazing to see the church Hebamah built. Three years ago I first visited the small river village of Novo Auripurina and met Pastor Hebamah. He is a short middle-aged man, quiet and shy. The best way I could describe his church is that it was "under construction". From the outside, it looked like the roof was finished, but the walls were only partially finished. When I went inside, there were the ruins of an older, smaller church. They were worshipping on the remnants of an old foundation with only one wall partly standing. There was debris piled up everywhere. It was really "under construction".



Sometimes it's the quiet guys that surprise you. And Pastor Hebamah did. He had finished his church and we were supposed to dedicate it. In fact, I was going to be preaching at their first service.

It was amazing, the most beautiful church on the Maderia River. The rubble was now a rich colored tile. The front and walls were finished with beautiful colored glass windows. There were new pews and a grand stage. And up front were 4 mega speakers standing 10 feet tall.

It was amazing.

The dedication service was awesome. As they sang their first song, a teenager came in waving a huge white flag over the congregation with the name "Jesus" in bold red letters. Then every light in the place went out. I thought the speakers had knocked out the little power station in town. But then another teenager came in with a blazing torch, real fire, smoke billowing, all symbolizing the glory of God entering into this new house of worship. Then about 20 young girls streamed in down the two aisles in white flowing outfits. They looked like angels filling the church. I've never experienced such a joyful dedication. And I didn't know what they were saying or singing, but I understood every word.

Then they read a history of the church that recounted the last 40 years. The account told of hardships, setbacks, sacrifices, and even a pastor who after preaching his sermon, went home, sat in a chair and fell asleep in Christ.

It told of families who persevered to grow a church in the jungle where simple survival was hard enough.

I look out over the congregation and there were tears flowing as people heard the names of their parents, grandparents and great grand parents. The story of this church was the story of their lives. The church's history was their history. And tonight was such an obvious display of God showing his people they were important to Him and His magnificent power to build such a beautiful church in such a place.

And the instrument that God used to build this church was a small, unassuming, humble pastor named Hebamah. He had a vision of a beautiful church rising out of rubble and he persevered with that dream God put in his heart. He persevered and succeeded, this short, quiet, shy, unassuming man.

He surprised me. But he was no surprise to God. That was the way He had planned it.

It's an amazing church standing high on the banks of the Maderia River – the church that Hebamah built.

September 19h – Sunday

Nonato the Apostle

As our boat chugs along plowing through the water, I was remembering the first one of these boats I traveled on. It was a boat that belonged to one of the churches in Pastor John's denomination that they use to do mission work. Its name was Apostelo Nonato. I didn't think much about the name at the time, but of course, everything in Portuguese was a mystery to me on my first few trips to the Amazon.

These boats we travel on are 1940's technology with a few newer add-ons here and there. They are all wood with a diesel engine that constantly chugs away in a deafening rhythm. After a while you get used to it, or maybe I'm slowly losing my hearing.

Today we are traveling from Novo Auripuana to Borba. The trip will take about 8 hours. I don't know how far it is between these two towns. No one thinks of distance on the river in terms of kilometers or miles, only in terms of how long it takes. So this is some of the best time I have to read, think and talk with the other pastors as our boat plows through the water.

One of the pastors on our trip is Pastor Asaphe. He is the president of the Amazonas district and the pastor of the largest church in their denomination, Educanos Church in Manaus. I've known Pastor Asaphe for more than 6 years and enjoyed the hospitality of his home on many of my trips. He is one of the denomination's most prestigious leaders. He is also the son of the first Brazilian pastor of their church, Nonato. Nonato is legendary. They consider him their "spiritual father" because he was the pioneer, founding their first church in Borba, training pastors, and sending them out to establish churches in the river villages of the interior. These were the first non-Catholic Christian Churches in the interior. Everywhere Asaphe goes, I hear the name Nonato spoken when people talk to him.

40 years ago, Nonato had a passion to reach the Indian people who were then just transitioning out of the jungles into permanent river villages. They were desperately poor and unaware of the world beyond the jungle. Nonato would travel these waters between Novo Auripuana and Borba paddling a small dug out canoe.

Back then these waters were alligator infested and extremely dangerous to travel through. These canoes have only about 2 inches of clearance above the water line. That means an alligator could swim right up to your boat and have you for lunch.

Asaphe told me how he remembers his mother's fearfulness of Nonato making these many trips, but this was his passion to bring the Gospel to the jungles of the Amazon.

I asked Asaphe how long it took his father to go from Borba to Novo Auripuana? It will take us 8 hours in our boat. Nonato paddled it in 7 days, stopping to sleep only 4 nights. Imagine, the courage and determination to paddle 7 days through alligator infested waters to bring the Gospel to the Indians of the Amazon. This was pioneer church planting like the work of Paul in the Book of Acts.

I've had the privilege to meet the legendary Nonato. He is a short, unassuming man, now 77 years old. Almost all of the original pastors he disciplined and sent out to give birth to this church body are gone. He is the last.

Now I understand why they named their boat Apostelo Nonato. I'd say he deserves the title of Apostle. Naming a boat after him seems appropriate to me.

September 20th – Monday

Managers or Disciplers?

It never fails. I try my best to be prepared for what God wants me to share on a mission trip. I write materials, bring books, plan for all the possible contingencies I can think of, and then God surprises me. Today, I found His surprise.

The Pastors and I were talking as our boat was making the final leg of our river trip. They were sharing their frustration of not having people to expand ministries and start new churches. They were talking about one of them going down south to another state and starting a new church while shuttling back and forth to their current church. The mentality beneath the idea is that the successful Pastor has what it takes to reproduce his successful ministry. Pastor John asked me if I thought it would work? Now several of these Brazilian pastors don't know English, but they can understand a chuckle and the word "No". I guess I just let it slip out a bit undiplomatically.

They were all silent and staring at me. I had some explaining to do.

These Pastors are successful so that they can raise up the next generation of leaders and disciple them to go and start new churches in far off places. God is calling them to a new stage in their ministry, to use the strength of the churches God has built through them to disciple and send out disciples.

What if the disciples of Jesus thought they were the only ones with the charisma and savvy to start churches? The problem is they haven't made the transition from being managers to disciplinarians. That really zinged them.

What all these Pastors are doing is managing the people they all disciple. They are training them to efficiently do tasks that are making their churches grow, and they have raised up large churches. But they are stuck in management mode. God wants them to move to discipling mode. New paradigm.

We had a great discussion as I described the difference between a manager and a discipler. They were really intrigued and could see how they were locked into manager thinking: run the organization well, everyone doing their job with excellence, and the church will prosper and grow. The trouble with that is that the only thing a manager produces is another manager. And they need disciples who are ready to go to new places and discover new methods of expanding the church. But it was obvious to them that they weren't thinking like disciplers. It was a huge revelation and an important issue they needed to address.

They were all over me to write everything down in the computer so they could translate it so it can be a "material" they can study. They want me to present this next week to all the Pastors at their Pastor's Meeting. And several of them want me to do a couple of days seminar to all their leaders at their churches on the topic. I didn't expect this? Surprise!

September 21, Tuesday

A Favor is Returned

After ending our Madeira River Trip back in Itacoaturia, Pastor John and I caught an express boat to take us east on the Amazon and then up the Utaman River to Itapriangra where my old friend Pastor Jason lives. Pastor Jason and I have a very special connection. Six years ago on my first trip to the Amazon, we became friends. Later he told me that for more than a year, he was praying for God to send someone to be a mentor and encourager in his life. He said that when we met, he knew I was the answer to his prayer.



His English is no better than my Portuguese, but we try our best to communicate. I'm looking forward to the day in Heaven when Jason and I can talk freely without having to depend on a translator.

Today was a great surprise. I haven't been to Itapriangra for 3 years, and wow, his church has just exploded. 3 years ago, his small church had about 60 people in it and Jason was struggling to make small groups work in his church. He has totally rebuilt his church so that it is twice as large as before. And with only 6 hours notice of our coming, he had the church packed for a service.

Wow! What happened? I asked Jason to tell me what had happened to turn things around and grow his church. He said that it took about 3 years for his people to catch the vision of small groups. For 3 years, Jason had failure after failure as he tried to get small groups going. I remember how frustrated and discouraged he was at my last visit. But he didn't give up. He just persisted until his people caught the vision. Now he has 17 small groups and the largest church in Itapriangra. What a great surprise!

The people were so excited that I was there. Even though most of them have never met me, the 6 original small group leaders remembered me for the times I had visited and led training seminars for them. They were all here tonight when I arrived. Their smiles said it all – they finally got their groups to work and multiply. They didn't give up, but kept on keeping on until it worked. And when it did, the church exploded in growth. People I'd never met came up to me and asked me if I were "Pastor Chad". They knew I was the answer to their Pastor's prayer. I had been their encourager. I was so humbled to have been given so much credit for doing so little.

The worship I experienced tonight was one of pure joy. These people have a spirit of celebration that just floored me. Where did it come from? They are a people who have persevered until they succeeded for Christ. What a witness to me. If only all of us could have such spiritual persistence in growing our church.

Tonight, I asked Jason's church to pray for Spirit of Life. It was such an honor to them. Their 17 group leaders came up and surrounded me as they all prayed. It was such a special time of prayer, I can't even find the words to express my feelings.

Tonight Jason returned the favor. He was an answer to my prayer.

September 22, Wednesday

Timing is Everything

I had a breakthrough with Pastors John and Montefusco today. We were talking about their need to deepen the spiritual maturity of their people. Their churches have exploded with growth in the past 5 years, but most of their members are still very spiritually immature. As they lamented, I reminded them about Interactive Discipling. A couple of years ago, Pastor John had it translated into Portuguese. We distributed a couple of thousand copies and conducted a number of training seminars on it. But Pastor John had paid a friend to do the translation and it didn't turn out that well. And the way the printing turned out, it appeared more like a Bible study booklet than a workbook. It didn't really come across as a disciple development tool like I had hoped it would. But it got out there and has had an impact. Pastor John still gets requests for more copies of ID from pastors who are still using it.

But as I look back on it, I realize now that ID was ahead of its time back then. The pastors were all caught up in the growth euphoria they were experiencing and weren't thinking about discipling people beyond the basics. But now things have changed. These pastors are really feeling the stress of not having disciplined their new converts. They need their core people to be more spiritually mature to deal with the growth they continue to experience.

Another development is that Pastor John has realized that printing these folded and stapled mimeograph booklets with a cartoon drawing on the front might work in your own congregation, but they just don't look good enough to market to the masses. Last year, at the denomination's national convention, Pastor John was elected to the position of National Education Director. Now he's on the hot seat to address the material vacuum in their churches. In an effort to publish something that would have national appeal, he put a collection of his Bible studies in a nice professionally printed book. It looks great. Now they get it. Looks do matter. This is a huge breakthrough.

John's book is the first material their denomination has ever published. They've finally realized that they need these kinds of publications to establish their identity and bring a semblance of doctrinal conformity to the teaching in their churches.

Things have changed. Now these guys are buzzing as they look at ID. Now they are getting the concept. They realize that discipling is not just teaching a series of Bible

studies, but developing people spiritually into mature, purpose driven followers of Christ. Now it makes sense to them.

Pastor Montefusco said, "I've never seen anything like this before. This is what we need in our churches today. We have to publish this." Pastor John turns to me, "My brother, let's publish this together in a nice book. We can do it. What do you think?"

Let me see... I think it's about time.

September 23rd – Thursday

God, I'm Really Sorry!

Yesterday, when Pastor John asked me if we could publish Interactive Discipling, I heard this huge sound in my spiritual subconscious. It sounded like, "gulp, swish, slosh".

God has caught up with me. I'm trapped.

Today, I've sequestered myself in the guest room at Pastor John's house. It's just me, 9 by 10 square feet, one window and the laptop. And as my fingers pound the laptop keys, I could swear from time to time, I heard the "swoosh" and "splash" of a tailfin slicing through water. I got caught. Oh God, I'm really sorry.

I've always wondered how Jonah could have such a bad attitude. When God told him to go on a missionary trip, he tries to run away by boarding a ship headed in the opposite direction. You know the story. God sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship. When Jonah's fellow passengers find out he is the cause of the storm, they reluctantly toss him overboard. And the Bible says, *"the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah ("gulp, swish, slosh"), and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17).*

There's that sound again! I heard it - "swoosh" and "splash".

I keep hearing it because it's my conscience telling me what I already know. I was supposed to have finished Interactive Discipling 4 years ago. I stopped after finishing the disciple's manual and never wrote the mentor's guide. I knew God wanted me to, but I just couldn't get motivated. Now I have to so that I can leave both manuscripts with Pastor John to do the translating and publishing. I'm going to stay in this room until I'm finished. Humm... I wonder how many days it will take me?

Did I mention that the one window in my room has bars on it?

“Swoosh” and “splash”... There’s that sound again. Just like Jonah, I’m trapped in the belly of this room until I finish my mission. And to be honest, I guess I’ve had a bit of a bad attitude for the last four years. It’s funny, I didn’t think I really had that bad of an attitude. But it was enough for me to justify doing other things rather than finishing the job God had given me. I guess that’s the deception Satan uses on all of us to avoid the tasks God gives. We just get busy with other things. I suppose most of us have become masters at the other things of life rather than the assignments God has given us. Souls hang in the balance and we are preoccupied with so many other things.

I guess a lot of Christian Churches in North America have been swallowed. The swooshing and splashing sounds we hear in our consciences should remind us of our mission to reach those who don’t know Jesus. What a great testimony to God’s amazing grace that he doesn’t let us go, but brings us to our calling.

“From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said: ‘In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me...’ And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” (Jonah 2: 1,2a, 10)

Yuck.

My attitude is getting better every minute. I’m keeping the keys on my laptop clicking away. The “click, click, clickity-click” is a lot better sounding than the “swoosh” and “splash”.

September 24th – Friday

First Generation Christians

Jackson is one of the young men who have been raised up as a leader in Pastor John’s church. He’s never gone to the seminary to get his pastor credentials, but he’s been the leader of small group leaders for several years and is now pastoring one of their satellite churches. He is one of the many leaders that Pastor John refers to as, “not a pastor, but really is a pastor”.

Four years ago, I felt God’s powerful impression on my heart about Jackson. He has been chosen by God to be a pastor in the fullest sense. He will be one of the major leaders of a new generation of pastors in this denomination. He knows. This trip I could see how he is about to make that total commitment to the Lord.

This evening I was talking to Jackson and a group of young men like him who are leaders in the church. Jackson asked me if I have been a Christian all my life. I told him that I had been born and raised in a Christian home. He and the other guys smiled.

He then asked how long my family had been Christians. I'm not totally sure, but probably for a couple of hundred years, at least. I quickly qualified that my family had its fair share of bad Christians backsliders, be they have at least claimed to be Christians for many generations. They chuckled. But for a few moments, they were all pretty quiet. I could tell they were thinking about what I'd just said.

I didn't realize it at the moment, but what was going on in their minds were feeling was jealousy. They envied me for being raised in a Christian home. They weren't. None of them were. They were all first generation Christians.

They were admiring me for being a lifelong Christian and I was admiring them as they told their stories about how they had come to know Christ and when they had committed their lives to him. They were powerful stories that defined their lives. They would never forget the person God used to connect with them, their moment of commitment, or the pastor who led them through the "sinners prayer". They would never forget what I have always had, and maybe to some extent, what I've taken for granted.

I think my envy for them was the greatest. I was jealous that I wasn't a first generation Christian.

I discovered something in this casual conversation. I verified it later when I met with more than 500 of the small group leaders of Pastor John's church. I asked them how many of them were first generation Christians. Guess what? More than 90% raised their hands.

No wonder they have such a passion to share their faith and lead others to Christ. They all remember what it was like to be lost, without Jesus, without forgiveness or a purpose for their lives.

They remember. They are a First Generation Church, like the first church in the Book of Acts. I envy them.

